

In Search of Sweet Home: Ojebeta's Mushroom of Freedom in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract: *Buchi Emecheta is a famous Nigerian novelist. Her famous novel The Slave Girl (1977) focuses on an orphan's search for a sweet home that would provide her care, affection, security and freedom. After the death of her parents, her ungrateful younger brother Okolie sells her to a rich businessman named Ma Palagada. Gradually Ojebeta, the unfortunate girl, discovers a cosy home in Ma's place. Ma appears to be a mother figure to Ojebeta and the fellow slaves are like her comrades in misfortune. But soon after Ma's death Ojebeta loses her freedom. With a view to looking for a real home she returns to her place of origin where she finds out that her younger brother who is a father figure to her has left the village. Later on the prospect of marrying Jacob and having a home of her own enlivens her soul as she will no longer be called a slave. But it is seen that she does not get what she has yearned for. She does neither get her dreamland nor does her peace of mind. This paper seeks to examine Ojebeta's frantic search for her sweet home and identity. She would rather return to her homeland and 'eat the mushroom of freedom' than live in the Palagada family and 'eat meat in slavery'.*

Keywords: *Sweet home, real home, freedom, search, security, homelessness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta is a prominent voice in Nigerian Women's Writing. In her novels she has dealt with different themes like the suppression of women, concept of slavery, issue of motherhood, the search for freedom etc. Her famous novel *The Slave Girl* underscores the life of a Nigerian woman named Ogbanje Ojebeta, the precious daughter of Okwuekwu Oda. Ojebeta has occupied a prestigious position in her family as she is the only surviving girl child in the household. She is such an object of care and an offspring of pride that her father undertakes a hazardous journey to bring the charms so as to ensure the life of their only girl. She was thus in a cosy home where she had a roof over her head. But very soon her peace of mind was destroyed for a critical disease called "Felenza" made its sudden arrival in her village Ibuza and took the lives of her parents. After the death of her parents, her younger brother Okolie makes a sinister design. He takes her sister to Onitsha Market and sells her only sister to a distant relative Ma Palagada. Thus immediately after the death of her parents she becomes homeless. But ironically enough it is in this new home that Ojebeta will try to relocate herself and in the process will try to find her freedom from her slavery.

2. ANALYSIS

Home is the place where one lives permanently. After the fatal decision of her brother Okolie who is desperate enough to earn money for preparing himself for his coming-of-age dance, an important Event in his locality, by selling her sister for eight English pounds, Ojebeta loses her original home. Being an innocent girl, she did not smack of her brother's malicious scheme. Just after the deadly transaction with Ma Palagada the treacherous brother leaves the Otu Market keeping his sister amidst unknown persons. Immediately after the departure of her only known relative, Ojebeta searches for her brother's company for she feels insecure without her brother's presence. Her longing for her dear brother and for going home from the market begins to increase. Although she is tired and exhausted as a result of a long journey the urge to go home is far more pressing than fatigue and exhaustion. The thought of going home is so heavy on her mind that she runs like a mad person in search of her 'little father':

And just like a hunter's arrow that had been quivering impatiently in its bow while the hunter covered his prey until the opportune moment to let fly, so did Ogbanje Ojebeta dash out of the

Palagada cloth stall. She ran, almost flew like an arrow, her little legs like wings, her heart beating fast in fear and anticipation, going as she thought to her brother – her brother, the only person she knew in this market full of strange people, the only person who had brought her here (p.57).

Ojebeta has spent a long period with her new mistress Ma Palagada in her new home. In her fellow slaves she finds a surrogate family. The picture of her former abode has dimmed after spending such a long time in her new habitation. Ojebeta has learnt a lot of things at Ma Palagada's house at Otu Market. She now accepts other female slaves as sisters. Although she seems quite satisfied with herself, she still holds her charms under her arm. It is a special kind of token given to her by her dead mother to protect her darling child from evil spirits. A perceptive reader can easily understand that by clutching her charms Ojebeta longs for attaining her mother's affection. She has also become aware of the fact that some of her fellow servants have forgotten which part of the country they have come from originally. They do not even wish to go home for they know that some slaves are given freedom when their masters grow aged. Amanna, one of the slaves at Palagada family considers the big house as her own house:

“This is our house,” Amanna pointed out with pride and enthusiasm; so great was her adaptation and acceptance that she obviously really did look on it as her home. (p.89)

This is due to the fact that albeit Ma Palagada buys slaves to flourish in her business, she treats her girl slaves as her own daughters. Ojebeta feels at home as she is allowed to sleep in the same building as if she belongs to the Palagada family. Yet in spite of enjoying homely ambience, she still clings to her charms in the dark. She is not ready to leave the charms despite Amanna's objection that the rattling sound disturbs her sleep.

Home is a hub of care and endearment. Although the orphan has spent some exciting moments at her new home, she has still some glimpses of her original home town especially when she is in despair and depression. She hopes that one day she will cross the River Niger and meet her big mother Uteh and live with her. She cherishes in her mind that some day she will be a free person. In the Palagada family Ojebeta and her fellow slaves are encouraged by their mutual mischievous joy. Going to the church every morning becomes a daily routine. Ma orders her girls to make fashionable dresses so that they appear really beautiful. Hearing Ma's sympathetic words towards her 'daughters' Ojebeta is so excited that she feels like dancing round her present mother to applaud her kind attitude. She considers herself lucky for having been bought by her. But despite her happiness Ojebeta still wishes to go to home as if Ibuza is in her bloodstream. She still waits eagerly for the arrival of her village people who would recognise her real identity from the marks on her face. She is thankful to Ma for providing her enough food and giving her a chance to attend to the Sunday school.

Ojebeta feels sorry for her brother's ingratitude. Her brother has not come to enquire about her. Going to the back of the house and sitting under the lemon tree she ponders over her brother's past action. At this particular moment one can note that it is the tree that provides a little shade, gives her a bit of protection. She knows it very well that she is given special care as she is going to be an intimate member in the Palagada family. Yet, in spite of her ensuing happiness her heart ransacks after her parents and her sweet home:

Her heart still bled for her own people, though. If only her mother had not died. If only her father had been spared to see his daughter now. But they were dead; there was no one to be proud of her little achievements (p.131).

She is so possessed with the idea of going home that whenever she goes to the riverside she looks for her people, the people of Ibuza. Sometimes she thinks of exchanging some words with her dear countrymen. She considers herself lucky enough to be able to remember her original home and her dear ones. She can very easily recall the shower of love bestowed on her by her parents. Whereas the other slave girls cannot call up their origins, she can, on the contrary, joyfully divulge her magnified thought regarding her parents. When Ojebeta will marry Clifford, Ma Palagada's only son she will no longer be treated as a slave girl. Thus she will be able to forge her identity. She is extremely delighted over the prospect of her mistress's visit to her original homeland.

Home is a storehouse of peace and relief. It is a heavenly haven, a coral island, a treasure island. It is a welcome place after a sea of trouble. That is why when she comes in close contact with her would-be husband, her joy knows no bounds. Having homely atmosphere she is so glad that she feels herself belonging to a superior race of human being:

But now, for the first time in about nine years, Ojebeta felt that she was being regarded as a human being, and she found herself beginning to behave like one, rather than like a hardened slave who would feel no emotion at seeing her mistress die (p.137).

But her ecstatic feeling does not last long. Very soon Ma dies and her slave girls feel insecure. Amanna, Nwayinuzo and even Ojebeta are tossed by the demise of their guardian and protector. They do not know what is awaiting their lot. They will have to possibly begin new episodes in their lives. Thus they are overburdened with the issue of homelessness. Ojebeta cannot decide whether she will return to Ibuza or not. She is apprehensive lest she is discarded by her relatives. If she is rejected by her own people there will be no way open to her except returning to her 'only home' she has known for a long period. Having lost her cover of umbrella she now decides to free herself from the heavy chains and shackles of servitude. Pressed by Victoria's wish to accompany her residence she feels the urge to express her hidden self. She can see through Victoria's evil intention of making her a perpetual slave. She does not want to be an everlasting servant. She only craves for freedom. She wishes to fly like a free bird. After the departure of her mother surrogate and realising her future husband's nonchalance she becomes impatient to return to her sweet home. She senses that the present moment is the apt moment for her to shatter the fetters of the cage, to move, and to look for a new destination. Rightly does she assert, "I want to go back to my people" (p.142). Taking her decision she goes to Pa Palagada for approval and fearlessly declares that she does not want to stay in the same place without Ma. When Pa Palagada asks her if she is sure of her acceptance in her home town she answers positively. She can no longer wait for Clifford's return from Aba. Nor will she intend to go with Victoria:

"I am not going to Bonny with you," she shouted defiantly. "I am going to my people. I'm going home to my people. I'm going home!" Her heart was beating fast. Her eyes were round and shone with the first joy of freedom. "I'm going home" (p.144).

She proclaims that she will pay back the money her brother takes from Ma. She would rather be free than allow herself be purchased a second time.

"Home is where one starts from", declares T.S. Eliot. It is associated with serenity and sovereignty, peace and fulfilment. When Ojebeta journeys out of her present location in search of a better habitation it is her companion Amanna who gives her the soundest advice – "Go to your people. Even if they can only afford to give you mushroom instead of meat, you'll know that it is mushroom of freedom" (p.146). Ojebeta also concurs with her companion's view. She would rather live the life of a simple village girl in her peaceful habitat than a well-fed slave in an alien land without the presence of her mother figure. In time of her departure from her dear friends she glances back at the building that 'had been her home for the past nine years' (p.146). The death of Ma Palagada still pierces her heart as if she had been her real mother. She only remembers the parting exhortations of Amanna. She would rather return to her cosy home and eat the wild looking mushrooms than spend her time in the foreign land and eat meat in slavery. Mushroom is usually a symbol of protection and security because of its umbrella like stature. It also stands for happiness and fulfilment. Ojebeta is in search of freedom. She will look for mushroom that is often neglected. It is uncouth and unsophisticated. Mushroom is contrasted with meat since it is not a palatable dish. Whereas meat is for refined people the mushroom, on the contrary, is for the poor and unpolished people. It is clear that Ojebeta does not want to spend a luxurious life. She only wants some fresh air to express her point of view.

Mushroom can grow anywhere. Thus it has the power of adaptability. Ojebeta is also very much like the mushroom. She has no definite domicile. Therefore the search for a fixed home and identity goes on and on. When she reaches her native land she is heartily welcomed by her people. She tells her relatives that the 'ogbanje charms' guide her to find the right path. They remind her of sweet home. She finds out that she has not altogether forgotten the ins and outs of her homeland. After knowing that her brothers have left Ibuza, she is disheartened for she cannot live without their warm touch. Ultimately she has to stay at her aunt Uteh's house. It is really unfortunate that she is still not happy because she has yet to get her freedom. The only consolation for her is that she 'belongs' to her people by right of birth and that she has ceased to become a 'slave'. Later on Ojebeta longs for a deeper union with Jacob, the stranger. It is through Jacob that she finds a new hope of recovering her lost home. The prospect of marrying Jacob and having a home of her own enlightens her. This is a 'painful happiness' for her. But she still feels the warmth of Okolie:

Sometimes she had entertained thoughts of having him back in Ibuza, so that things would be as they had been before she went to Onitsha (p.166).

If her brothers approve of her marriage with Jacob she would once again get back her 'own home'. Ultimately she is satisfied to belong to Jacob because it is he who has given her a new home albeit it is only one room that serves for everything – eating, sleeping and sitting.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus Ojebeta's quest for her 'own home' becomes successful because she is now free in Jacob's house. But this is only an imaginary home as a perceptive reader can easily note that Ojebeta has not yet become 'free'. Although she is now a mature woman she cannot but change masters. She does not get her utopia, her ideal home. Thus her search for a 'sweet home' is only an illusion as she is only changing houses thereby never attaining comfort, ease, security and satisfaction that an ideal home can provide.

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